

Reflection on the Kerala Forest (Amendment) Bill, 2024

A Call to Preserve Our Forests and Restore Ecological Balance

The Kerala Forest (Amendment) Bill, 2024 represents a pivotal opportunity for our state to reassess its forest conservation and ecological sustainability priorities. While past forest laws, such as those framed during British rule, emphasised the economic value of forests, the need today is to recognise their ecological value. Forests are not merely sources of timber or revenue; they are the homeland of wild animals, microorganisms, and plants - a cornerstone that sustains life on Earth. Human actions driven by economic interests have disrupted the delicate rhythm of these ecosystems, contributing to climate change, landslides, and human-wildlife conflicts. By exploiting loopholes in existing laws, we have endangered the very foundation of our survival. The proposed bill rightly emphasises stringent measures to protect our forests. Through the following stories, I aim to highlight the urgency of understanding forests' ecological value and the need for decisive action.

Story 1: Human-Wildlife Conflict

The story of Arikomban, a wild male elephant known for raiding ration shops in Chinnakanal, Munnar, epitomises the deeper issue of human-wildlife conflict. Arikomban's actions were not random; they symbolised a protest against habitat encroachment and ecological injustice.

Key Issues:

- **Disruption of Elephant Corridors:** The government allocated the 301 Colony within a known elephant corridor, disrupting natural migration routes and forcing elephants into human settlements.
- **Keystone Species Under Threat:** Elephants' movements into human spaces represent a cry for attention, highlighting habitat destruction and their struggle for survival.

Statistics:

- Between 2016 and 2024, Kerala reported 940 human deaths and 7,917 injuries due to wildlife attacks. Of these, 200 deaths were caused by elephant attacks, with significant incidents occurring annually.
- The highest fatalities were recorded in 2021-22, with 114 deaths, including 35 caused by wild elephant encounters.

Reflection:

In the context of eco-theology, elephants are co-partners in the cosmic dance of creation, and their plight is a reminder to realign human actions with nature's rhythm. By recognising their symbolic "protest," we affirm the interconnectedness and sacredness of all life.

Story 2: Landslides and Forest Destruction

Kerala's history of landslides between 2018 and 2024 underscores the grave consequences of deforestation, unplanned construction, and climate change.

Notable Incidents:

1. August 2018: Kerala faced unprecedented floods and 4,728 landslides, resulting in 483 deaths.
2. 2019 Puthumala and Kavalappara Landslides: These disasters claimed 76 lives and highlighted the vulnerability of hilly regions.

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3. Pettimudi (2020): A massive landslide buried tea plantation workers, causing 65 deaths.
4. 2024 Wayanad Landslides: Over 420 lives were lost, with entire villages devastated.

Reflection:

Landslides are not isolated events but result from decades of unregulated land use and forest degradation. Sustainable land management, early warning systems, and robust disaster management are essential to prevent future tragedies.

Story 3: Deforestation and Land-Use Changes

From 2018 to 2024, Kerala's forests faced numerous challenges, including illegal tree felling, land diversion, and controversial policies.

Key Issues:

- Illegal Felling in Wayanad (2024): 126 trees were felled illegally, implicating forest officials in corruption.
- Forest Diversion: 146 hectares of forestland were converted for non-forestry purposes, increasing human-wildlife conflicts.
- Declining Green Cover: Studies reveal a loss of 9.60 kilo hectares of forest, contributing to 8.01 metric tons of CO₂ emissions.

Reflection:

Deforestation exacerbates natural disasters and disrupts ecosystems. Stringent forest management laws and community participation are imperative for reversing this trend.

Supporting the Bill

The Kerala Forest (Amendment) Bill, 2024 offers critical measures to address these challenges:

1. Combating Pollution: Prohibiting littering and dumping plastics in forests to protect rare flora and fauna.
2. Strengthening Penalties: Introducing strict penalties for illegal activities like sand quarrying and damaging forest boundaries.
3. Wildlife Protection: Criminalizing actions such as entering forests with weapons or poisoning water bodies.
4. Empowering Forest Officers: Granting officers immediate arrest powers to address practical challenges in remote areas.
5. Increasing Fines: Revising penalties to reflect the severity of offences and ensure stricter enforcement.

Conclusion

Forests are lifelines for biodiversity, climate stability, and ecological harmony. Destroying them jeopardises not only wildlife but also human survival. This bill is an opportunity to establish Kerala as a global leader in sustainable forest management. Let us act decisively to safeguard our forests for future generations. The time to act is now.

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(Statistics are from the newspaper reports and the internet)